

JR Cultures: Differences and Similarities on the Japanese Railways

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This study is a part of a much larger piece of research conducted into the shinkansen and its symbolism (being published as a book, *Shinkansen – Bullet Train to Symbol of Modern Japan*, by Routledge). The issue of 'culture' became increasingly of interest to me due the course of my shinkansen research, as did anthropology. So I want to test some of the ideas at this conference.

I would like to thank the following organisations for their support of my research: JR Tokai, JR East, JR Kyushu, JR West, JR Hokkaido, RTRI, JRJT, Cardiff University, the Japan Foundation Endowment Committee, Japan Airlines, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, and the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation.

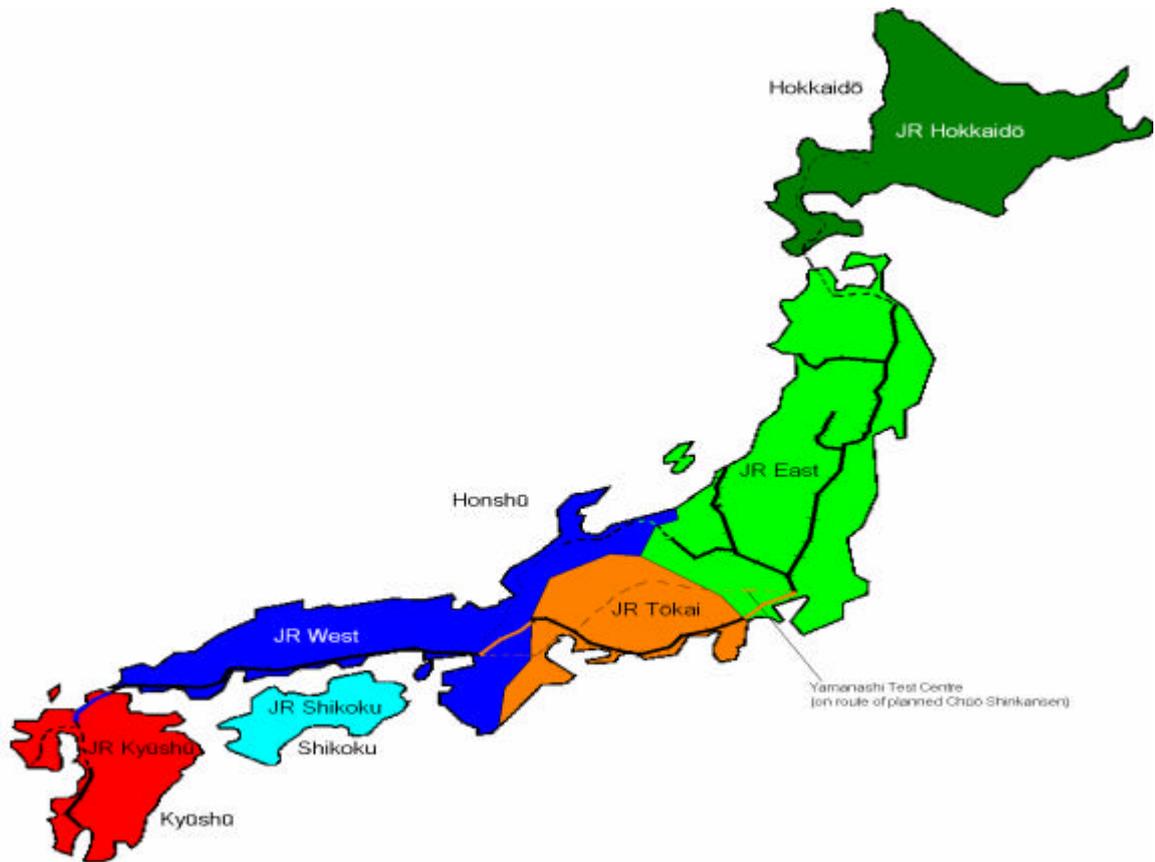
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH?

There is a need to be aware of differences in cultures. To begin with there are academic reasons and interest. But on top of this there are also practical reasons – e.g. companies/countries looking to learn from Japanese companies need to find appropriate partner/model. This paper aims to demonstrate that the JR companies and trains – particularly the shinkansen – are not as homogeneous as many may assume and that being aware of the differences are useful in gaining an understanding of the companies, regions of Japan they serve, and Japan itself.

This paper will consider the situation in some of the JR companies today by considering whether certain differences in practices and outward appearance are a reflection of differing cultures. In particular, the paper will consider the imagery, design and usage of the different shinkansen operated by four of the JR companies, the *meishi* at these companies, and the uniforms at these companies. This will further lead to discussion about the relative significance of these differences and whether it is possible to talk of a particular 'JR culture', a common 'JR group culture', or even 'a Japanese culture'.

OVERVIEW OF JR

Japanese National Railways (JNR) was reformed in 1987 to deal with the rising debts and – perhaps more importantly – the continuing problems with the labour unions and the perceived problem of a bad 'culture' and work-ethic within the organization. JNR was broken up and 'privatised' into six passenger railway companies and one nationwide freight company (see map). It is important to remember there are over 200 other railway companies in Japan – which this paper will not be considering.

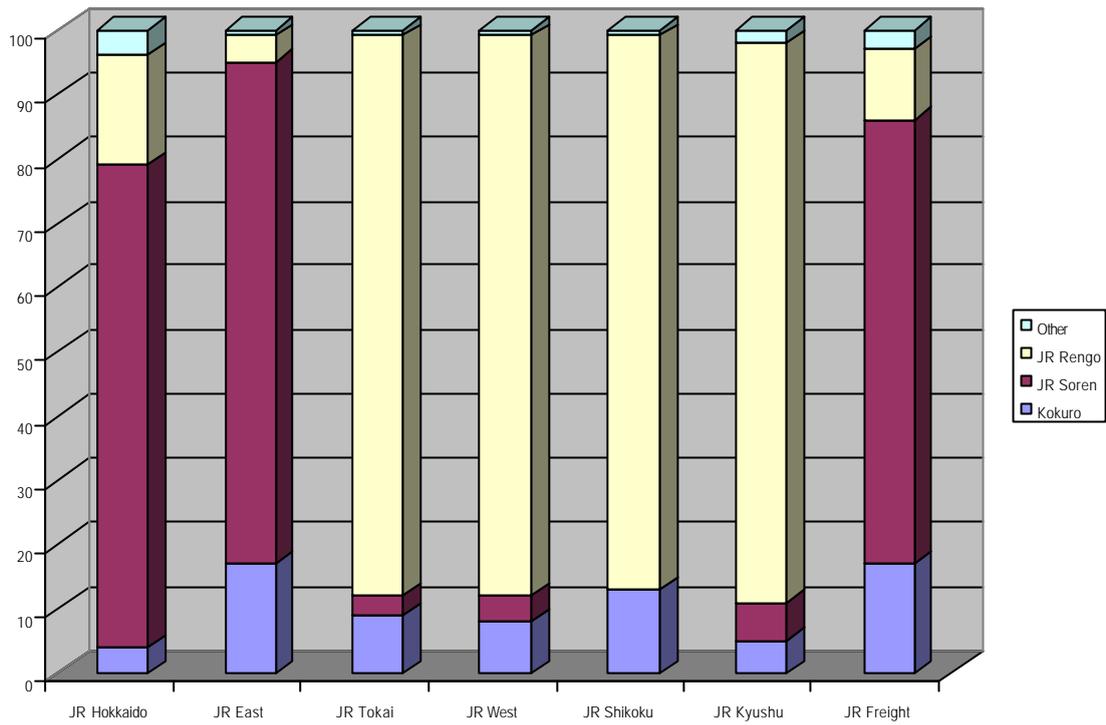


DIFFERENT CULTURES

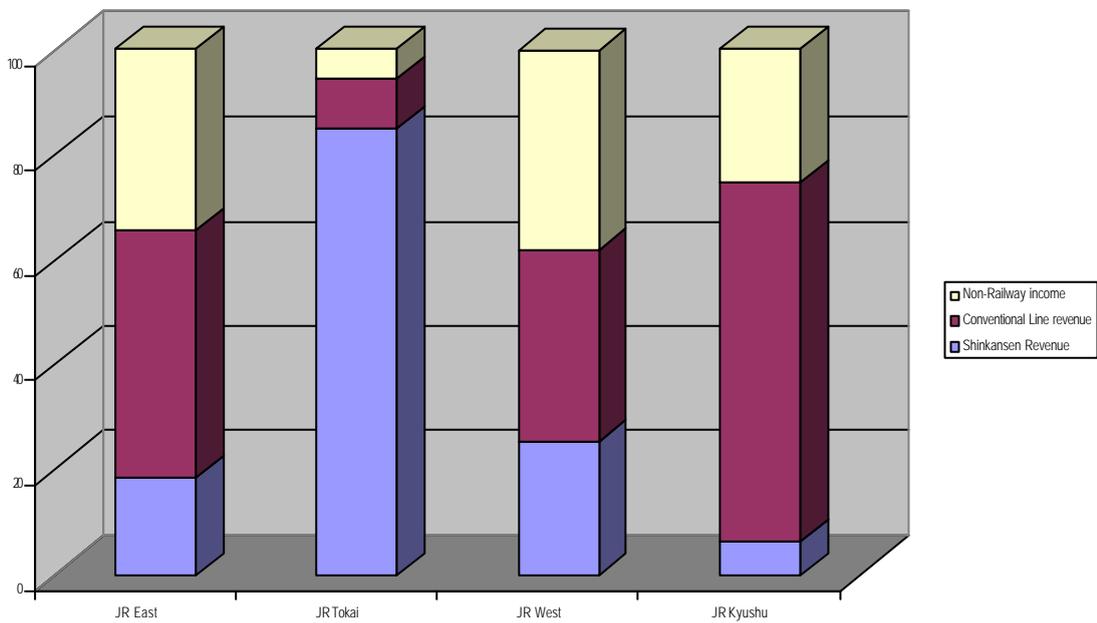
Let us work with the hypothesis that there **are** differences in 'culture' between each of the JR companies. There are various contributing factors that may need to be considered when one considers the causes of this. The main ones that I would like to suggest are: Union membership, Differences in types of customer and services (e.g. shinkansen or conventional lines, business people or tourists, relative importance of commuters) and who the competitors for business are, and Regional differences (differences in people and differences in environmental challenges)

The graphs below show some of the differences in relation to these issues.

Union Membership



Importance of the Shinkansen



Regional Differences

Regional differences in Japan (e.g. Kansai vs Kanto) are well known – although the similarities are probably greater than is sometimes suggested (and differences can often be due to more practical reasons than regional background). Regional differences can be seen in passenger's behaviour.

Group	Tokaido	Sanyo	Tohoku	Joetsu	Hokuriku
1	Talking Sleeping Sitting quietly/watching view	Talking Sitting quietly/watching view Sleeping		Sleeping Talking Sitting quietly/watching view	Sitting quietly/watching view
2	Drinking (non-alcohol) Using mobile (not talk)	Reading book Drinking (non-alcohol)	Sleeping Sitting quietly/watching view Talking	Drinking (non-alcohol)	Talking Sleeping
3	Reading magazine Eating snack Reading book Listening to music	Reading magazine Using mobile (not talk) Drinking (alcohol) Looking at timetable/map Reading newspaper Eating <i>bento</i> Listening to music	Using mobile (not talk) Reading book Reading magazine Drinking (non-alcohol) Reading newspaper Eating <i>bento</i> Listening to music	Reading newspaper Eating snack Reading magazine Listening to music Reading documents Reading JR magazine Eating <i>bento</i> Using mobile (not talk) Reading book	Reading JR magazine Reading newspaper Drinking (non-alcohol) Reading magazine Listening to music
4	Eating <i>bento</i> Playing non-elec. games Drinking (alcohol) Reading newspaper Reading <i>manga</i> Using computer/PDA Putting on make-up Playing elec. games Reading documents Eating fast food Reading diary	Eating snack Reading <i>manga</i> Reading documents Writing/studying Reading diary Using computer/PDA	Eating snack Reading <i>manga</i> Drinking (alcohol) Playing non-elec. games Looking at timetable/map Using computer/PDA	Playing elec. games Putting on make-up Drinking (alcohol) Writing/studying Looking at timetable/map Reading <i>manga</i>	Using mobile (not talk) Drinking (alcohol) Reading book Eating snack Using computer/PDA Reading <i>manga</i> Kissing Writing/studying Talking on mobile phone

DIFFERENT SHINKANSEN

The shinkansen is the most symbolic of Japanese trains. Services started in 1964, but since then the network has expanded (and continues to expand) throughout the archipelago. It sits at the top of a hierarchy of services... not all trains in Japan are as comfortable, fast or as on time as the shinkansen. Since 1987 the JR companies have been responding more and more to the needs of their customer base. The result is that shinkansen also reflect these differences and the different approaches of the JR companies, which overlap with differences in cultures at the JR companies.

DIFFERENT STATIONS

Despite its beautiful countryside, Japan's cities are not always so pleasing. Palin (formerly of Monty Python fame, but now a renowned travel writer) said of Japan: 'All these towns seem to be alike, and considering how important a part aesthetics play in Japanese culture, remarkably unattractive. There is a constant feeling of being cramped. The houses are small and narrow, the streets have no pavements, the architecture of a shanty town in Ethiopia is more inventive.' Traditionally little imagination has been used in station designs – the shinkansen was a symbol of *toshi keikaku* and standardization. Recently there have been improvements, e.g., the Tohoku extension and Kyushu Shinkansen, as the shinkansen and station building is seen as a part of *machi zukuri*, with the station as the *genkan* to the city.

DIFFERENT MEISHI

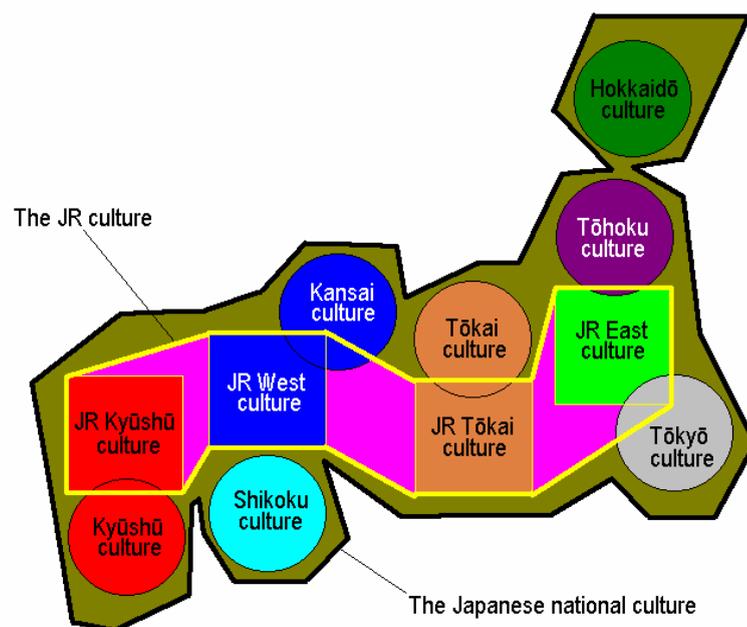
Meishi (business cards) are an important part of an employee's identity. Having interviewed and met many employees at JR companies, it became clear to me that the nature of the *meishi* varied from company to company. There may also be some differences according to the nature of their position or work, but the over-riding difference appears to be the company. The differences appear to comply with some other differences spotted between the companies. It should be noted that at least one group of employees do not have *meishi* – the train drivers.

DIFFERENT UNIFORMS

Companies have strict rules relating to uniform. One story that made the newspapers was that a train was delayed due to a problem with the driver's uniform (apparently this was not the case). Companies have both summer and winter uniforms – although the date of change over appears to vary between companies. Drivers and conductors have to wear white gloves (not all the time) and carry a pocket watch that they are given upon employment at the company. JR Tokai uniform tends to look the most police-like (they are even wearing ear-pieces at present). JR East uniforms made partly from recycled PET bottles.

JR CULTURES

If one is to try to speak of a 'culture', then generalization is necessary. The further you drill down, the more differences become apparent. From a distance, it is possible – necessary? – to speak of a Japanese culture, for example. There are then regional cultures within Japan which are distinct from the national culture and each other, while clearly being similar in many respects. I would argue that there are distinct cultures at each of the JR companies (although there are likely to be separate and varied sub-cultures within each company, some of which may be similar to those in other companies). At times the companies are even rivals – some more than others and this can be reflected in their culture too.



CONCLUSION

The excellent safety record of Japanese railways has been hit by the Amagasaki crash in April 2005. The Japanese media has concentrated its criticism on the culture of trains being expected to arrive on time and that one minute late is considered a problem. However, I would argue that the crash is much more a reflection of JR West's situation and the general lack of acceptance in Japanese society to fire poor workers. Overall, the JR companies may seem quite similar. But, there **are** different cultures at each and it is important to be aware of these differences and to continue considering the reasons why and what impact these differences can have.

NOTE

All maps and figures within this article are by the author and may not be used or copied without permission.

Many of the photographs shown in the original presentation can be found by looking through the various pages starting at <http://www.hood-online.co.uk/shinkansen/>

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